My Dreams
Keller, Helen

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conditional surrender, and if they had been I could no longer have represented them. There was a powerful cabal in Congress and they held secret conversation with Mr. Blair when he came to Richmond; how low their spirit had sunk I do not know, but remember that it excited angry feeling among some of the troops and has been the subject of denunciations by many true soldiers since the war ended.

. . . . I have hopefully looked forward to your long deferred visit and if my health and circumstances had permitted it, would have gone to Richmond to confer with and if possible engage you in some further work I had contemplated for our cause, to me a sacred memory and dear as early love. . . .

Yours faithfully,
*Jefferson Davis.*

# My Dreams

By Helen Keller

EVERYBODY takes his own dreams seriously, but yawns at the breakfast-table when somebody else begins to tell the adventures of the night before. I hesitate, therefore, to enter upon an account of my dreams; for it is a literary sin to bore the reader, and a scientific sin to report the facts of a far country with more regard to point and brevity than to complete the literal truth. The psychologists have trained a pack of theories and facts which they keep in leash, like so many bulldogs, and which they let loose upon us whenever we depart from the strait and narrow path of dream probability. One may not even tell an entertaining dream without being suspected of having liberally edited it, as if editing were one of the seven deadly sins, instead of a useful and honorable occupation. Be it understood, then, that I am discoursing at my own breakfast-table, and that no scientific man is present to trip the autocrat.

I used to wonder why scientific men and others were always asking me about my dreams. But I am not surprised now, since I have discovered what some of them believe to be the ordinary waking experience of one who is both deaf and blind. They think that I can know very little about objects even a few feet beyond the reach of my arms. Everything outside of myself, according to them, is a hazy blur. Trees, mountains, cities, the ocean, even the house I live in, are but fairy fabrications, misty unrealities. Therefore it is assumed that my dreams should have peculiar interest for the man of science. In some undefined way it is expected that they should reveal the world I dwell in to be flat, formless, colorless, without perspective, with little thickness and less solidity—a vast solitude of soundless space. But who shall put into words limitless, visionless, silent void? One should be a disembodied spirit indeed to make anything out of such insubstantial experiences. A world, or a dream, for that matter, to be comprehensible to us, must, I should think, have a warp of substance woven into the woof of fantasy. We cannot imagine even in dreams an object which has no counterpart in reality. Ghosts always resemble somebody, and if they do not appear themselves, their presence is indicated

by circumstances with which we are perfectly familiar.

During sleep we enter a strange, mysterious realm which science has thus far not explored. Beyond the border-line of slumber the investigator may not pass with his common-sense rule and test. Sleep with softest touch locks all the gates of our physical senses and lulls to rest the conscious will, the disciplinarian of our waking thoughts. Then the spirit wrenches itself free from the sinewy arms of reason and, like a winged courser, spurns the firm, green earth and speeds away upon wind and cloud, leaving neither trace nor footprint by which science may track its flight and bring us knowledge of the distant, shadowy country that we nightly visit. When we come back from the dream-realm, we can give no reasonable report of what we met there. But once across the border, we feel at home, as if we had always lived there and had never made any excursions into this rational, daylight world.

My dreams do not seem to differ very much from the dreams of other people. Some of them are coherent and safely hitched to an event or a conclusion; others are inconsequent and fantastic. All attest that in Dreamland there is no such thing as repose. We are always up and doing, with a mind for any adventure. We act, strive, think, suffer, and are glad to no purpose. We leave outside the portals of Sleep all troublesome incredulities and vexatious speculations as to probability. I float wraithlike upon clouds, in and out among the winds, without the faintest notion that I am doing anything unusual. In Dreamland I find little that is altogether strange or wholly new to my experience. No matter what happens, I am not astonished, however extraordinary the circumstances may be. I visit a foreign land where I have not been in reality, and I converse with peoples whose language I have never heard. Yet we manage to understand one another perfectly. Into whatsoever situation or society my wanderings bring me, there is the same homogeneity. If I happen into Vagabondia, I make merry with the jolly folk of the road or the tavern.

I do not remember ever to have met persons with whom I could not at once communicate, or to have been shocked or surprised at the doings of my dream-companions. In its strange wanderings in those dusky groves of Slumberland, my soul takes everything for granted and adapts itself to the wildest phantoms. I am seldom confused. Everything is as clear as day. I know events the instant they take place, and wherever I turn my steps, mind is my faithful guide and interpreter.

I suppose every one has had in a dream the exasperating, profitless experience of seeking something urgently desired at the moment, and the aching, weary sensation that follows each failure to track the thing to its hiding-place. Sometimes with a singing dizziness in my head I climb and climb, I know not where or why. Yet I cannot quit the torturing, passionate endeavor, though again and again I reach out blindly for an object to hold to. Of course, according to the perversity of dreams, there is no object near. I clutch empty air, and then I fall downward, and still downward, and in the midst of the fall I dissolve into the atmosphere upon which I have been floating so precariously.

Some of my dreams seem to be traced one within another like a series of concentric circles. In sleep I think I cannot sleep. I toss about in the toils of tasks unfinished. I decide to get up and read for a while. I know the shelf in my library where I keep the book I want. The book has no name, but I find it without difficulty. I settle myself comfortably in the Morris-chair, the great book open on my knee. Not a word can I make out, the pages are utterly blank. I am not surprised, but keenly disappointed. I finger the pages, I bend over them lovingly, the tears fall on my hands. I shut the book quickly as the thought passes through my mind, "The print will be all rubbed out if I get it wet." Yet there is no print tangible on the page!

This morning I thought that I awoke. I was certain that I had overslept. I seized my watch, and, sure enough, it pointed to an hour after my rising time. I sprang up in the greatest hurry, knowing that breakfast was ready. I called my mother, who declared that my watch must be wrong. She was certain it could not be so late. I looked at my watch again, and, lo! the hands wiggled, whirled, buzzed, and disappeared. I awoke more

fully as my dismay grew, until I was at the antipodes of sleep. Finally my eyes opened actually, and I knew that I had been dreaming. I had only waked into sleep. What is still more bewildering, there is no difference between the consciousness of the sham waking and that of the real one.

It is fearful to think that all that we have ever seen, felt, read, and done, may suddenly rise to our dream-vision, as the sea casts up objects it has swallowed. I have held a little child in my arms in the midst of a riot and spoken vehemently, imploring the Russian soldiers not to massacre the Jews. I have relived the agonizing scenes of the Sepoy Rebellion and the French Revolution. Cities have burned before my eyes, and I have fought the flames until I fell exhausted. Holocausts overtake the world, and I struggle in vain to save my friends.

Once in a dream a message came speeding over land and sea that winter was descending upon the world from the North Pole, that the Arctic zone was shifting to our mild climate. Far and wide the message flew. The ocean was congealed in midsummer. Ships were held fast in the ice by thousands, the ships with large, white sails were held fast. Riches of the Orient and the plenteous harvests of the golden West might no more pass between nation and nation. For some time the trees and flowers grew on, despite the intense cold. Birds flew into the houses for safety, and those which winter had overtaken lay on the snow with wings spread in vain flight. At last the foliage and blossoms fell at the feet of Winter. The petals of the flowers were turned to rubies and sapphires. The leaves froze into emeralds. The trees moaned and tossed their branches as the frost pierced them through bark and sap, pierced into their very roots. I shivered myself awake, and with a tumult of joy I breathed the many sweet morning odors wakened by the summer sun.

One need not visit an African jungle or an Indian forest to hunt the tiger. One can lie in bed amid downy pillows and dream tigers as terrible as any in the pathless wild. I was a little girl when one night I tried to cross the garden in front of my aunt's house in Alabama. I was in pursuit of a large cat with a great, bushy tail. A few hours before he had clawed my little canary out of its cage, and crunched it between his cruel teeth. I could not see the cat; but the thought in my mind was distinct: "He is making for the high grass at the end of the garden. I 'll get there first." I put my hand on the box border and ran swiftly along the path. When I reached the high grass, there was the cat gliding into the wavy tangle. I rushed forward and tried to seize him and take the bird from between his teeth. To my horror, a huge beast, not the cat at all, sprang out from the grass, and his sinewy shoulder rubbed against me with palpitating strength! His ears stood up and quivered with anger. His eyes were hot. His nostrils were large and wet. His lips moved horribly. I knew it was a tiger, a real live tiger, and that I should be devoured—my little bird and I. I do not know what happened after that. The next important thing seldom happens in dreams.

Some time earlier I had a dream which made a vivid impression upon me. My aunt was weeping because she could not find me; but I took an impish pleasure in the thought that she and others were searching for me, and making great noise, which I felt through my feet. Suddenly the spirit of mischief gave way to uncertainty and fear. I felt cold. The air smelled like ice and salt. I tried to run; but the long grass tripped me, and I fell forward on my face. I lay very still, feeling with all my body. After a while my sensations seemed to be concentrated in my fingers, and I perceived that the grass blades were as sharp as knives, and hurt my hands cruelly. I tried to get up cautiously, so as not to cut myself on the sharp grass. I put down a tentative foot, much as my kitten treads for the first time the primeval forest in the back yard. All at once I felt the stealthy patter of something creeping, creeping, creeping purposely toward me. I do not know how at that time the idea was in my mind,—I had no words for intention or purpose,—yet it was precisely the evil intent, and not the creeping animal, that terrified me. I had no fear of living creatures. I loved my father's dogs, the frisky little calf, the gentle cows, the horses and mules that ate apples from my hand, and none of them had ever harmed me. I lay low, waiting

in breathless terror for the creature to spring and bury its long claws in my flesh. I thought, "They will feel like turkey-claws." Something warm and wet touched my face. I shrieked, struck out frantically, and awoke. Something was still struggling in my arms. I held on with might and main until I was exhausted, then I loosed my hold. I found dear old Belle, the setter, shaking herself and looking at me reproachfully. She and I had gone to sleep together on the rug, and had naturally wandered to the dream-forest where dogs and little girls hunt wild game and have strange adventures. We encountered hosts of elfin foes, and it required all the dog tactics at Belle's command to acquit herself like the lady and huntress that she was. Belle had her dreams, too. We used to lie under the trees and flowers in the old garden, and I used to laugh with delight when the magnolia leaves fell with little thuds, and Belle jumped up, thinking she had heard a partridge. She would pursue the leaf, point it, bring it back to me, and lay it at my feet with a humorous wag of her tail, as much as to say, "This is the kind of bird that waked me." I made a chain for her neck out of the lovely blue Paulownia flowers and covered her with the great heart-shaped leaves.

Dear old Belle, she has long been dreaming among the lotus-flowers and poppies of the dogs' paradise.

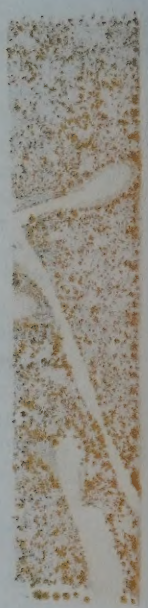
Certain dreams have haunted me since my childhood. One which recurs often proceeds after this wise: A spirit seems to pass before my face. I feel an extreme heat like the blast from an engine. It is the embodiment of evil. I must have had it first after the day that I nearly got burned.

Another spirit which visits me often brings a sensation of cool dampness, such as one feels on a chill November night when the window is open. The spirit stops just beyond my reach, and sways back and forth like a creature in grief. My blood is chilled, and seems to freeze in my veins. I try to move, but my body is still, and I cannot even cry out. After a while the spirit passes on, and I say to myself shudderingly: "That was Death. I wonder if he has taken her." The pronoun stands for my teacher.

In my dreams I have sensations, odors, tastes, and ideas which I do not remember to have had in reality. Perhaps they are the glimpses which my mind catches through the veil of sleep of my earliest babyhood. I have heard "the trampling of many waters." Sometimes a wonderful light visits me in sleep. Such a flash and glory as it is! I gaze and gaze until it vanishes. I smell and taste much as in my waking hours; but the sense of touch plays a less important part. In sleep I almost never grope. No one guides me. Even in a crowded street I am self-sufficient, and I enjoy an independence quite foreign to my physical life. Now I seldom spell on my fingers, and it is still rarer for others to spell into my hand. My mind acts independent of my physical organs. I am delighted to be thus endowed, if only in sleep; for then my soul dons its winged sandals and joyfully joins the throng of happy beings who dwell beyond the reaches of bodily sense.

The moral inconsistency of dreams is glaring. Mine grow less and less accordant with my proper principles. I am nightly hurled into an unethical medley of extremes. I must either defend another to the last drop of my blood or condemn him past all repenting. I commit murder, sleeping, to save the lives of others. I ascribe to those I love best acts and words which it mortifies me to remember, and I cast reproach after reproach upon them. It is fortunate for our peace of mind that most wicked dreams are soon forgotten. Death, sudden and awful, strange loves and hates remorselessly pursued, cunningly plotted revenge, are seldom more than dim, haunting recollections in the morning, and during the day they are erased by the normal activities of the mind. Sometimes, immediately on waking, I am so vexed at the memory of a dream-fracas that I wish I may dream no more. With this wish distinctly before me I drop off again into a new turmoil of dreams.

Oh, dreams, what opprobrium I heap upon you—you, the most pointless things imaginable, saucy apes, brewers of odious contrasts, haunting birds of ill omen, mocking echoes, unseasonable reminders, oft-returning vexations, skeletons in my Morris-chair, jesters in the tomb, death's-heads at the wedding feast, outlaws of the brain that every night defy the mind's police service, thieves of my Hesperidean



apples, breakers of my domestic peace, murderers of sleep! "Oh, dreadful dreams that do fright my spirit from her propriety!" No wonder that Hamlet preferred the ills he knew rather than run the risk of one dream-vision.

Yet remove the dream-world, and the loss is inconceivable. The magic spell which binds poetry together is broken. The splendor of art and the soaring might of imagination are lessened because no phantom of fadeless sunsets and flowers urges onward to a goal. Gone is the mute permission or connivance which emboldens the soul to mock the limits of time and space, forecast and gather in harvests of achievement for ages yet unborn. Blot out dreams, and the blind lose one of their chief comforts; for in the visions of sleep they behold their belief in the seeing mind and their expectation of light beyond the blank, narrow night justified. Nay, our conception of immortality is shaken. Faith, the motive-power of human life, flickers out. Before such vacancy and bareness the shock of wrecked worlds were indeed welcome. In truth, dreams bring us the thought independently of us and in spite of us that the soul

may right
Her nature, shoot large sail on lengthening cord,
And rush exultant on the Infinite.

### DREAMS AND REALITY

It is astonishing to think how our real wide-awake life revolves around the shadowy unrealities of Dreamland. Despite all that we say about the inconsequence of dreams, we often reason by them. We stake our greatest hopes upon them. Nay, we build upon them the fabric of an ideal world. I can recall few fine, thoughtful poems, few noble works of art, or any system of philosophy, in which there is not evidence that dream-fantasies symbolize truths concealed by phenomena.

The fact that in dreams confusion reigns and illogical connections occur gives plausibility to the theory which Sir Arthur Mitchell and other scientific men hold, that our dream-thinking is uncontrolled and undirected by the will. The will—the inhibiting and guiding power—finds rest and refreshment in sleep, while the mind, like a bark without rudder or compass, drifts aimlessly upon an uncharted sea. But, curiously enough, these fantasies and intertwistings of thought are to be found in great imaginative poems like Spenser's "Faerie Queene." Lamb was impressed by the analogy between our dream-thinking and the work of the imagination. Speaking of the episode in the cave of Mammon, Lamb wrote:

> It is not enough to say that the whole episode is a copy of the mind's conceptions in sleep; it is, in some sort — but what a copy! Let the most romantic of us that has been entertained all night with the spectacle of some wild and magnificent vision, recombine it in the morning and try it by his waking judgment. That which appeared so shifting and yet so coherent, while that faculty was passive, when it comes under cool examination shall appear so reasonless and so unlinked, that we are ashamed to have been so deluded, and to have taken, though but in sleep, a monster for a god. But the transitions in this episode are every whit as violent as in the most extravagant dream, and yet the waking judgment ratifies them.

Perhaps I feel more than others the analogy between the world of our waking life and the world of dreams because before I was taught I lived in a sort of perpetual dream. The testimony of parents and friends who watched me day after day is the only means that I have of knowing the actuality of those early, obscure years of my childhood. The physical acts of going to bed and waking in the morning alone mark the transition from reality to Dreamland. As near as I can tell, asleep or awake, I felt only with my body. I can recollect no process which I should now dignify with the term of thought. It is true that my bodily sensations were extremely acute; but beyond a crude connection with physical wants, they were not associated or directed. They had little relation to one another, to me, or to the experience of others. Idea—that which gives identity and continuity to experience—came into my sleeping and waking existence at the same moment with the awakening of self-consciousness. Before that moment my mind was in a state of anarchy in which meaningless sensations rioted, and if thought existed, it was so vague and inconsequent that it cannot be

made a part of discourse. Yet before my education began, I dreamed. I know that I must have dreamed because I recall no break in my tactual experiences. Things fell suddenly, heavily. I felt my clothing afire, or I fell into a tub of cold water. Once I smelled bananas, and the odor in my nostrils was so vivid that in the morning, before I was dressed, I went to the sideboard to look for the bananas. There were no bananas, and no odor of bananas anywhere. My life was in fact a dream throughout.

The likeness between my waking state and the sleeping one is still marked. In both states I see, but not with my eyes. I hear, but not with my ears. I speak, and am spoken to, without the sound of a voice. I am moved to pleasure by visions of ineffable beauty which I have never beheld in the physical world. Once in a dream I held in my hand a pearl. I have no memory-vision of a real pearl. The one I saw in my dreams must, therefore, have been a creation of my imagination. It was a smooth, exquisitely molded crystal. As I gazed into its shimmering deeps, my soul was flooded with an ecstasy of tenderness, and I was filled with wonder, as one who should for the first time look into the cool, sweet heart of a rose. My pearl was dew and fire, the velvety green of moss, the soft whiteness of lilies, and the distilled hues and sweetness of a thousand roses. It seemed to me, the soul of beauty was dissolved in its crystal bosom. This beauteous vision strengthens my conviction that the world which the mind builds up out of countless subtle experiences and suggestions is fairer than the world of the senses. The splendor of the sunset my friends gaze at across the purpling hills is wonderful; but the sunset of the inner vision brings purer delight because it is the worshipful blending of all the beauty that we have known and desired.

I believe that I am more fortunate in my dreams than most people; for as I think back over my dreams, the pleasant ones seem to predominate, although we naturally recall most vividly and tell most eagerly the grotesque and fantastic adventures in Slumberland. I have friends, however, whose dreams are always troubled and disturbed. They wake fatigued and bruised, and they tell me that they would give a kingdom for one dreamless night. There is one friend who declares that she has never had a felicitous dream in her life. The grind and worry of the day invade the sweet domain of sleep and weary her with incessant, profitless effort. I feel very sorry for this friend, and perhaps it is hardly fair to insist upon the pleasure of dreaming in the presence of one whose dream-experience is so unhappy. Still, it is true that my dreams have uses as many and sweet as those of adversity. All my yearning for the strange, the weird, the ghostlike is gratified in dreams. They carry me out of the accustomed and commonplace. In a flash, in the winking of an eye, they snatch the burden from my shoulder, the trivial task from my hand, and the pain and disappointment from my heart, and I behold the lovely face of my dream. It dances round me with merry measure, and darts hither and thither in happy abandon. Sudden, sweet fancies spring forth from every nook and corner, and delightful surprises meet me at every turn. A happy dream is more precious than gold and rubies.

I like to think that in dreams we catch glimpses of a life larger than our own. We see it as a little child, or as a savage who visits a civilized nation. Thoughts are imparted to us far above our ordinary thinking. Feelings nobler and wiser than any we have known thrill us between heart-beats. For one fleeting night a princelier nature captures us, and we become as great as our aspirations.

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